

11
LETTER

FROM A

BURGESS of EDINBURGH,

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

LORD PROVOST,

CONCERNING

The present HIGH PRICES

OF

WHEAT and CORN,

WHEREIN

Modern Traffic in CORN is considered, and
wise Regulations by the Laws of FRANCE
in Times of Dearth are recited,

James Henderson Esq. Secy. to the Provost
with corn, the people shall curse him; but bless-
ing upon the head of him that selleth it.

PROV. XI. 26.

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A

LETTER, &c.

MY LORD,

April 15. 1757.

NEVER was so loud a cry as now, of the dearth of bread within the walls and in the suburbs of this ancient city of EDINBURGH, where your Lordship presides as chief magistrate. The reason of this dearth, or high price of corn, cannot easily be found out: Gentlemen of fortunes are divided in their opinions on this head. Many of them speak, (I am sorry to say it), as their interest or connections prompt them; few, very few there are who consider the poor man's case! I have seen two printed papers on this subject; but far from giving a substantial reason for this dearth, they only tend, especially the long one, to bewilder the reader. This long paper seems to be the dictation of the gentlemen who *iras & verba locant*. The author of this paper is in a manner dragged in to confess that the last crop was middling, and insinuates that the interposition of the merchant is absolutely necessary, betwixt the landholder or farmer, and the baxter or mealmonger. This, he says, is the method in England. How far this is the method in our neighbouring country, I cannot say; but, by the sequel, gentlemen are left to judge, how far the interposition of merchants, or rather corn-mongers, (for as they import none from a foreign country, I cannot allow them the name of merchants) is necessary.

I affirm, if our present corn-mongers were importers of corn from foreigners, or from our American colonies, in that case they would be MERCHANTS indeed, and ought to be respected as great blessings, in this time of dearth, to these poor lands: but upon inquiring, I find no importers from foreign markets, but corn brought coastways from one place in Scotland to another, perhaps in this very Frith of Forth, or at most from some English sea-ports, (as appears from the custom-house books,) to prevent the baxter, brewar, or meal-man, from

from buying at first hand, and to compel them to buy at second or third hand. Corn-mongers contracts with landholders and farmers, or even corn-monger with corn-monger, is notorious; and I have reason to believe from them proceed all our present calamities.

The impartial reader (for many partial readers will peruse this, whom I disdain) is left to judge, whether or not this modern practice deserves the odious epithet of *withholding corn*? and undoubtedly the persons guilty of withholding corn, ought to be punished.

In order to find out the practice in other countries in time of dearth, I look'd into the ordonances of France. That nation, now our enemy, (*fas est et ab hoste disceri*) has been fam'd for wise ministers of state. Of this the famous Colbert, Fleury, and others are recent examples. A modern author, whose works are just published, says,
 ' In France, corn of the growth of the country is reckoned as a contraband commodity, and may not be
 ' exported, how plenteous soever the crop, without permission, either general or particular, pursuant to the
 ' old and new ordonances 1577. 1699. on pain of forfeiture, and 500 livres fine. The general permissions
 ' for exportation are usually granted by order of council, for a certain time, as specified therein. There is
 ' also another sort of permissions, granted in like manner, but not extending beyond the kingdom, on declarations made to the intendant of the places it is
 ' sent to, and certificates of the arrival and delivery there. As to particular permissions, they are passports
 ' signed by a secretary of state, bearing the persons names to whom they were granted, the quantity and
 ' quality of the corn, the ports by which it is to pass, or to be shipp'd, the place intended for, and other the
 ' like circumstances. There have been many ordonances and royal declarations made in France for the
 ' government of the Inland trade of corn, and the quality of the persons that may use it. The most
 ' noted and important are these of Charles the IX. 1567, Henry III. 1577. and Lewis the XIV. 1699,
 ' besides a great many others, mostly in 1709, a year so fatal to France by the loss of all its corn, as scarce
 ' to be repaired by the many wise regulations which the
 ' prudence

prudence and care of the magistrates caused to be published almost every day.--In the ordonance August 1699, amongst other articles, merchants in the kingdom may import corn from foreign countries, and in times of plenty export it, by virtue of general or particular permissions; and all COMBINATIONS among corn-merchants, whether residing in the same or different cities, are prohibited, under the pain of 2000 livres fine, and being declared incapable of trading in corn for the future; and all, both merchants and others, are prohibited to buy corn or other grain while green, and before the harvest, on pain of 3000 livres fine, and corporal punishment; and all such bargains are declared null, even these made six months before the declaration. Besides these general ones, the city of Paris hath also particular regulations, concerning corn brought thither by water, 1672, in which, all dealers trading on the river for the supply of Paris, are prohibited to buy standing corn, on pain of forfeiture to the seller, and fine to the buyer: and dealers may not buy meal within ten leagues of the city. The dealers &c. are obliged, immediately on the arrival of their grain or meal, to present their bill of parcels to the sworn corn-metters, who are faithfully to registrate it, and carry copies of it every Monday to the recorder of the city. The dealers, &c. are obliged immediately, on the arrival of their grain, if musty or heated, or if the boat be in danger, to sell it in the boat.

Thus much a celebrated author writes concerning the wise regulations of France in time of dearth; and that this is a time of dearth, none will deny; and they deserve the most serious consideration from all persons of condition, especially those in the magistracy. I believe in these regulations our modern corn-mongers will see something that touches them to the quick. I have reason to think that some, if not all of them, would pay a 3000 livre fine, and perhaps ten times the sum, to be excused from a corporal punishment.

Upon the whole, I may safely say, that the eyes of all the inhabitants are fix'd on your Lordship, to make a strict enquiry into the causes of this dearth, and to punish the authors, their partners or abettors, if it is found

found to be an artificial dearth, by combinations, contracts, or other unjustifiable measures.

I believe there is a deficiency in last crop ; but no such deficiency as to occasion this advanced price.

There is something in these French regulations that strike at the root of combination, or an artificial dearth, in such a manner, that I believe were they in force here, and duly execute, good oat-meal would be sold at 10d. a-peck, and all other grain 40 or 50 per cent. cheaper than at present.---But here it may be said, How can these corn-mongers be prosecuted as the law now stands? There is no evidence of unfair practices on their part: They are men of generous dispositions: They contribute liberally to the poor; are willing to concur in any wise regulation to prevent scarcity in time coming; are men of great characters in the city; have great connections, and great substance, nay immencely rich. I answer, The *Directors* of the *South-sea Company* were men of great substance, nay of immense fortunes; generous to the poor, even to prodigality; yet were the authors of bringing on the nation the dreadful convulsion it then laboured under. The supreme court of the nation considered these people as obnoxious to the publick; weeds that ought to be carefully rooted out; and justly, after mature deliberation, confiscated their immense estates for their villainous artifices.

The act of confiscation of their estates was founded on the following resolutions of the Lords and Commons, viz. 2d February 1720, ' Resolved by the house of peers, ' that the South-sea directors, declaring 30 per cent. ' dividend for the half, ending at Christmas, and 50 per ' cent. per annum for 12 years after, was a villainous ' artifice to defraud and delude his majesty's good subjects.' 18 February 1720, ' Resolved that the setting the stock to sale by subscription, at high prices, ' above the intrinsic value by the directors, was a gross ' and notorious fraud, and one great cause of the sinking ' of the publick credit, and bringing on the nation the ' distress it then laboured under.' ' Resolved that the advising ' the late directors to set the stock to sale by subscription, ' at the high and extravagant dividends abovesaid, ' by any person in the administration, was a notorious a-

base

base of the trust reposed in them, to the prejudice of his MAJESTY'S government, and the interest of the kingdom.'

20th February 1720, The commons punished John Aisleby, Esq; one of their members, by expelling him the house, and committing him to the Tower: they bring in a bill for restraining him from going out of the kingdom, and from alienating his estate, as was done in the case of the directors.

A full relation of the proceedings of these South-sea directors (a trade prejudicial to the interest of the nation in general, but not grinding the face of the poor, by advancing the price of corn or bread, as it is at present in this half of the island of Britain, who, alas! are sinking under the load of poverty, being noways able to bear it) may be seen at length in the annals of these times: The humorous periodical writings on that subject are very entertaining, and the curious will find them well worth his perusal.

And indeed the immense riches amassed by our modern corn-mongers, resemble so much the South-sea directors, that I could not forbear quoting some of the resolutions of parliament at that critical period.—— It is reported, and I believe not without foundation, that some of our modern corn-mongers keep five or more riders, constantly on the out-look for intelligence, riding from place to place, in Scotland as well as England, to buy up corn, and drive contracts, to engross the corn-trade to their constituents, to the exclusion of others, who are perhaps honest baxters of substance, who would honestly manufacture what they buy, and bring it directly to market, whereby the publick would save two profits, if not more.

I am fully persuaded, that if once an enquiry was set on foot, into the practices of our modern corn-mongers, by your Lordship in council, with advice of the town's worthy assessors, after mature deliberation of your Lordship and brethren in the magistracy, materials would be found from the corn-mongers books, servants, riders and others, sufficient to lay a solid foundation for a prosecution: This, and this only will redress our present grievances.

Your

Your Lordship and council have, as I hear, wisely given the corn-mongers and others security for what corn they may bring within your Lordship's jurisdiction, that if any of their corn should be carried off by a mob, or by any persons assembled in a tumultuous manner, then the community should make good the loss: this is an excellent and prudent measure to encourage the importation or consignment of grain. But as your Lordship and council protect the corn-mongers property, so, I hope, your Lordship will protect the privileges of these injured citizens within your Lordship's jurisdiction, and, as far as possible, redress the present grievances, as they cry aloud, and are heard in our streets every day.--The common begging poor are not under so miserable circumstances, as many honest well disposed families, who keep within doors, languishing under the want of bread to themselves, and innocent children. The repeated instances of their pledging their body cloaths for a few shillings, to buy food for themselves and their infants; while others beg under the pretence of making a raffle; and some of a more liberal education sell their household furniture for trifles; these, I say, cry aloud for your Lordship's authority to be exercised on those who are guilty of *withhold corn*

The trade of the place is decayed by the great scarcity of circulating cash; whilst the cash that ought to be in circulation, is hoarded up by the corn-mongers, who, disdaining that name, assume to themselves that of a bankier.

In this letter to your Lordship, I have not studied rhetorical expressions, or metaphysical reasoning on obscure points of trade, not well vouched, with which the long paper I mentioned, abounds; but have confined myself to truths, melancholly truths that cannot be denied. If any thing herein set forth appears prejudicial to the cause of truth, I shall chearfully acknowledge my error, and in a public manner declare it: and I would earnestly beg your Lordship would invite all persons in the community, to declare what they know, or what hereafter may come to their knowledge, relative to the premises. It is a publick cause, in which every person whatever is concerned to expiscate truth. I might here enlarge on the

the great necessity of an enquiry, from the present posture of our publick affairs. The united kingdoms are engaged in a war with France, and the flames of it likely to spread; but I hope, in the course of the enquiry, all these things will be duly considered, and have their full weight when explained by men of abilities. I flatter myself, that what has been said, will have its due influence with your Lordship. If any thing has inadvertently dropt from my pen, that ought not to have been published, your Lordship will have the goodness to interpret my meaning in the most favourable sense.

Something might be observed here from the tenor of our burghs-tickets. The oaths there taken, by accepting of the freedom, have in them something to the present purpose; 'I shall not project, nor procure any monopolies, nor be partner in any, directly or indirectly; and finally, I shall not attempt, nor do any thing hurtful to the liberties or common-weal of this burgh.'

Methinks I now see the haughty corn-monger in his chariot, after perusing these pages, throw it by; saying, This is the greatest stuff ever said or wrote on this head: We still affirm, that the interposition of the merchant is necessary, or the poor must starve: We deal on smaller profit than the baxter or meal-man, and we bring our corn directly to market: We are horridly belied in these pages. I answer, that unless you are a corn-monger, baxter, meal-man, and Leith-factor, all in one person, you, and none else, are the persons who advance the price; for example,

A baxter buys 500 sacks of flower, at any port in England; the corn-monger buys at the same price; are both shipp'd; come into Leith at one tide: the baxter, with his own servants and horses, carries it to be manufactured, and brought to market immediately; and here I affirm, if a baxter, brewar, or meal-man, buys more than he manufactures, he is to be deemed rather worse than a corn-monger, and prosecute in the same manner.

On the other hand, the corn-monger brings his sacks to his lofts at Leith by porters: he has the loft-rent porters, Leith-factors, clerks, &c. to pay, not to mention

tion his own profit, which, he says is *small*, and should most wait till some baxter (who has been disappointed perhaps by his alertness in forestalling the market) comes up to his price. I affirm in this case, that two, or more profits are laid on the poor consumer, who pays the reckoning for all, the same case will hold their bargains in Scotland, which are still of more pernicious consequences.

When the corn-monger has read this length, no doubt he'll be inquisitive to know the author of this incoherent stuff, or rhapsody to perplex him : That his curiosity may be gratified as far as is convenient, I answer, the author, am the head of a numerous family, and saluted every third day by my maid, with her meal under her arm, with a, ' Sir, Give me fifteen-pence, ' fifteen-pence halfpenny to buy a peck of meal for the bairns breakfasts ;' she adds, or mumbles a word or two more, signifying her displeasure with the author of this advanced price.

This is all the satisfaction I can give at present ; and the only reason for my spending some hours in writing these few pages. If they have the wish'd-for effect of lowering the market-prices, and an enquiry being made by your Lordship and Council, or other judges in the poor country, I am more than sufficiently rewarded ; it is thrown by disregarded, Mr. Corn-monger lolls in his chariot saying,

O ! Ego quantum egi ! Quam vasta potentia nostra est

And then the only consolation left the author is, that he meant well ; but some will say, ' Poor fellow ! ' ever the head of a numerous family, who buys a peck of meal every three days, expect to have a hearing of his pitiful pamphlet to be read, when a moderate corn-monger is in the play, and is concerned in the consequences, ready, on his *very small* profits, to get up his coach and six, proudly boasting with him, as in the Satyrists,

*Quis leget hac ? * * * * * Hercule non
Vel duo vel nemo.*

F I N I S.